

A Funny Line? Not Anymore

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"The first lieutenant can always issue you another pair of safety glasses, but he can't issue you a new set of eyes." I learned that line many years ago while I was reading a Navy boatswain's mate training manual. The line probably stuck with me because it seemed humorous at the time. I certainly didn't see it as a great revelation in personal safety.

My thinking has changed over the years, though, especially now that I'm the first lieutenant aboard a Coast Guard offshore buoy tender. We have to hoist buoys that weigh more than 9 tons. We also work with concrete sinkers that weigh five times more than my sport-utility vehicle.

One morning, we were in the final stages of deploying a 5.5-ton buoy. Our ship was "anchored" to the sea floor by the buoy's mooring chain and sinker. The chain was being held by a stopper, a spring-loaded device with an open top in which the chain rests. When the bridge watch gave the order to set the buoy, a deck crewman (a seaman) tripped the chain stopper with a sledgehammer, and the deck supervisor started lowering the buoy into the water.

This event looked routine until I saw a dented safety helmet go spinning across the deck. It belonged to the seaman who had tripped the chain stopper. He was down on one knee, with blood streaming from his forehead. When he tripped the stopper, either the sledgehammer doubled back, or the corner of the stopper caught him as it released the chain. After what seemed like an eternity, the seconds of silence that followed my discovery finally were shattered by word for a corpsman to lay to the buoy deck.

Fellow deck crewmen were giving first aid to the seaman a few seconds later when the corpsman and the captain arrived on the scene. Once the corpsman had stabilized the victim, a Coast Guard utility boat from a nearby search and rescue station took him to a

hospital ashore. Doctors found his injuries weren't as bad as first feared, and they released him later the same day—with some stitches and a headache.

As it turned out, I was able to replace the seaman's shattered and blood-stained safety glasses with a new pair. If he hadn't worn his safety equipment that day, the results would have been tragically different: a pair of eyes, or perhaps a life, that I could never replace. 🙏



When the mishap described in this article occurred, the crewmen were getting ready to set a buoy similar to the one shown here.